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Get On With It

Make Services for Children and Youth a Priority

2000 Annual Report

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Make Services for Children and Youth a Priority

2000 Annual Report

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Contents

A letter to the young people who need social services 5

A Word from the Advocate 7

Making It Better 11

- Stable leadership
- Needs-based budgeting
- Community-based services
- A stable and experienced workforce
- An early development fund
- Support for comprehensive Aboriginal services

The Work of the Advocate's Office 27

- Individual advocacy services
- Fair complaint processes
- Local advocacy development
- Systemic advocacy
- Youth advocating for each other

Appendix A: The letter to all Members of the Legislative Assembly of BC 39

A letter to the young people who need social services

In May of 2001, my term as the first Child, Youth and Family Advocate of British Columbia will come to an end. As I present my final report, young people in British Columbia who need services, particularly those in government care, are foremost in my thoughts. You have taught me so much.

The most important part of our work at the Advocate's Office has been listening to the thousands of stories you (and those who care for you) have shared with us. Children, youth, parents, friends, foster parents, grandparents, social workers and many others have been determined to make sure you are treated fairly and receive the help you need, even in the face of huge obstacles.

When confronted with problems, you have shown courage, resilience and wisdom. You have also shown us that your opinions, thoughts, desires and dreams must be the focus of all of our work; that adults who are providing services must, in a respectful way, walk beside you to help you make good decisions about your life.

In all my reports, I have tried to reflect what I have heard from you; your views and your needs. You are the ones who really know and understand what is not working and what needs to change. The issues raised in this, my final report, have come from your stories. This report is written to let the public and the people responsible for the system know what I think needs to happen to fix the system. It is directed to our elected representatives and senior government officials. It is what you have said you need. I hope I got it right.

I know that each of you usually has the ability to speak for yourself—to be your own best advocate. However, when this is not possible, we need to make sure you can get help from someone you trust.

I am so very proud to have been able to work with you and to contribute my voice on your behalf. It has been a privilege to be the Child, Youth and Family Advocate of British Columbia.

Joyce Preston
Child, Youth and Family Advocate

A Word from the Advocate

In my final annual report as the Child, Youth and Family Advocate of British Columbia, it is with the deepest regret that I report to the Legislature and to British Columbians that there has been no substantial improvement in services for children and youth.

In the past five and a half years my office has heard from, or about, more than 12,000 children and youth who are receiving or trying to access services such as foster care, mental health services, drug and alcohol services and services for young people with **special needs**. The stories we have heard clearly show the inadequate job the government is doing to support children and youth in need.

Over the past decade, much has been written about the needs of children and youth who require government services. Extensive research has been conducted, substantive reports produced and recommendations made about the need for real change. Despite all of this activity, British Columbia has made little progress in ensuring that these young people's needs are met. For the most part, it has been a case of all talk and no action.

It is absolutely vital that young people have access to three kinds of publicly funded services: education, health care and social services. For the most part, essential needs with respect to education and health care are currently being met. Access to essential social services, however, is sorely lacking. I believe that to make a real difference for these children and youth, the BC government needs to make dramatic changes in how it priorizes, funds and structures the social service programs that serve them.

My 1999 annual report, ***Not Good Enough***, outlined serious shortcomings in the child and youth social service system. I raised five key concerns:

1. The Ministry for Children and Families' focus on reducing costs resulted in a reduction in services, leaving many people desperate and in crisis.

A child or youth with **special needs** requires extra support to enhance or improve his or her health, development, or quality of life.

Sally is the mother of two very young children, one of whom is severely handicapped. She, along with her extended family, worked out a complicated care schedule so that they could keep her young baby at home while still meeting the family's overall needs. She phoned the Advocate's Office after being abruptly told that the overnight help she'd been receiving would be cancelled in two weeks, as the budget had all been spent. She was desperate—how could she care for both her son and the rest of her family? She had put a great deal of effort into keeping her son at home, and now she was faced with the possibility of losing him; he might have to go into foster care with another family in order to receive service needed.

Not Good Enough, is available on our website at www.advokids.org.

2. The significant reduction in the availability of programs for those who voluntarily request services (as opposed to those in extreme crisis situations which would require a child to be removed from the family home).

3. Local offices and their staff have not been given adequate support to develop comprehensive services. Good legislation, policy and standards exist but, for the most part, have not been implemented.

4. There is a staffing crisis in the Ministry for Children and Families due to problems in the recruitment of new social workers and the retention of present staff. This has not allowed for the development of a stable and experienced workforce.

5. Early development services have not been expanded, despite compelling research proving their importance. In addition, early intervention services have been reduced due to Ministry pressure to reduce costs.

In 2000, there has been no substantial response to these concerns.

In September 2000, I wrote to all of British Columbia's Members of the Legislative Assembly encouraging them to work across political lines to ensure the availability of services for children and youth (see Appendix A). I asked if they would:

Sandra, 14, was being discharged from a mental health facility. It was known that she had severe suicidal tendencies, yet no services had been put in place. Her mother feared for her daughter's iife and was waiting to hear back from the Ministry for Children and Families about available services and a plan to keep Sandra from harming herself. What if no help was in place when Sandra was discharged? The mother had no assurance of getting services for her child.

- Ensure access to essential social services.
- Demand the development of a needs-based budget for child and youth services.
- Demand a comprehensive, long-term staffing strategy that is publicly reported with annual updates.
- Support the creation of an early development fund

Members of the official opposition responded affirmatively to each question. The government responded by referring to earlier correspondence that discussed ongoing work in these areas and the various

constraints impeding this work. I report this not as a partisan issue, but simply to raise public awareness about elected officials' response to concerns about services for children and youth.

In November 2000, in accordance with the *Budget Transparency and Accountability Act*, the provincial government conducted budget consultations. An all-party committee toured the province to hear from citizens. This process resulted in the publication of a document called the *Pre-Budget Consultation in British Columbia Report* (see www.fin.gov.bc.ca/bcp). Unfortunately, the focus of the consultations was on issues such as the cost of classroom size, health procedures and highway maintenance. As important as these topics may be, they must not be allowed to overshadow the grave need children and youth have for social services.

As my term as Advocate comes to an end, I remain determined to be part of a society that truly cares for all its children and youth in tangible ways. But will we support and defend the rights of:

- The 10-year-old who has already lived in eight foster homes in his or her short life?
- The drug-addicted young person becoming involved in the sex trade?
- The young person suffering from **fetal alcohol syndrome** who has been in youth court eight times in the past two years?
- The child living below the poverty line who is often hungry?
- The pierced and tattooed youth living on a downtown street, panhandling for money?

Fetal alcohol syndrome consists of a combination of physical and mental problems that may develop in children whose mothers consumed alcohol during pregnancy. These problems may include developmental disabilities, behavioural problems, and impaired growth.

We say we care about these young people—about all young people—but there is much evidence to the contrary. The services available are severely inadequate. On their own, these children and youth have no vote, no voice. Only adults are in a position to make our elected representatives accountable when it comes to meeting their needs. I am therefore calling on British Columbians to ensure that our government provides adequate social services to all young people who need them.

Making It Better

The time to take action on behalf of young people in need is long overdue. In this report, *Get On With It: Make Services for Children and Youth a Priority*, I outline a comprehensive plan to improve services for children and youth. I hope that the result will be a demand on the part of British Columbians for action and accountability from government.

More than 30,000 children and youth in British Columbia require services beyond what their families and communities can offer them. The Ministry for Children and Families is responsible for providing these services, which include **child protection**, **guardianship**, alcohol and drug services, mental health services, youth corrections, and **community living services**.

Child protection services investigate situations in which child abuse is suspected. If the claim is supported, child protection workers intervene to protect the young person involved.

A **guardian** has ongoing legal responsibility for the care of a young person, including responsibility for major decisions about such issues as schooling and health care.

Community living services include programs for young people with developmental disabilities.

Not Good Enough (my 1999 annual report, tabled with the Legislative Assembly in April 2000) stands today as a record of the lack of comprehensive essential social services available to children, youth and families in British Columbia. In the year 2000, there have been no substantive improvements to address the issues discussed in my previous reports.

I believe that to make a truly significant difference in the lives of young people, dramatic changes need to be made in how government prioritizes, funds and structures the social service programs that serve them. Here are the six key components required:

- Stable leadership.
- Needs-based budgeting.
- Community-based services.
- A stable and experienced workforce.
- An early development fund.
- Support for comprehensive Aboriginal services.

Stable leadership

In the five and a half years that I have been Advocate, there have been many changes in the government systems designed to serve young people and

their families. The Ministry for Children and Families has been through three major organizational changes, six ministers and four deputy ministers. In 2000 alone, there have been three ministers and two deputy ministers.

Each new leader, each new structure and each new budget year has shifted the focus and changed the priorities. Constant change has impeded the maturing of this large ministry. As a result, there have been no significant improvements to services. Further, I have seen no evidence of either long-term planning or commitment to adequate funding. Both are necessary.

Therefore, I call on the government to ensure that the Ministry for Children and Families develop stable leadership, as well as a long-term plan to provide adequate social services to children and youth to be implemented over the next three years.

Needs-based budgeting

Clearly, financial resources are necessary if the Ministry for Children and Families is to provide essential social services. In the present fiscal year, the Ministry's budget is $1.5 billion—14% of the provincial budget. There is inadequate information about how this money is spent and whether it is actually sufficient. Ministry officials state only that it is used to provide programs for children and families, program delivery and corporate services. These categories make little sense. They do not tell us, for example, how much is spent on mental health services, alcohol and drug programs, or foster homes. Without clear, detailed information on how much is spent in which areas and how much more is needed, there can be no public accountability.

Transparency alone is not enough. In addition to detailed reporting of current expenditures, the Ministry must change its current budgeting process to address two other major areas of concern. First, senior officials must create a needs-based budget. Secondly, elected representatives must implement this budget. This they can do by making children and youth an absolute priority—by taking responsibility for ensuring that the **Treasury Board** provide adequate resources to meet young people's needs within a reasonable time frame.

Treasury Board is the Cabinet committee responsible for budget and management matters.

This is not the first annual report in which I have called upon the Ministry to create a comprehensive needs-based budget and to commit to an implementation plan to meet the identified needs. The Ministry has thus far responded that it is bound by "government-wide practice and as such [is] unable to address implementing a new system." Consequently, needs-based budgets have not been put in place. New funding is assigned to address current crises without addressing the overall needs of children and youth, and pilot projects are often created with no assurance of sustained funding.

I strongly disagree with this approach. Needs-based budgets can and must be developed. Agency staff who are knowledgeable about their own communities can provide the basic information required to assess current needs. The Ministry should follow the guidelines set out in ***Enhancing Accountability and Performance***; budgets should specify: numbers of clients needing services, associated costs, desired outcomes, benchmarks to assess progress, and a multi-year projection of future costs.

***Enhancing Accountability and Performance**: A Framework and Implementation Plan* is a joint report by the Auditor General of British Columbia and the Deputy Ministers' Council. It states that *"When government affects the lives of its citizens in as wide a range of social and economic activity as it does today, citizens have the right to know on a regular basis what their government intends to achieve and what it has actually accomplished."*

In previous annual reports, I have discussed the need for additional resources for services for children and youth. In doing so, I've made every attempt to respect the constraints under which government must operate when allocating funding. I've recognized that other government ministries have legitimate and important needs. However, the fact is that timely, essential social services for children and youth must be given absolute priority. Without them, many young people will carry their problems into adulthood, increasing the likelihood of substantial future social costs. As any good parent knows, in good times or bad, children come first. So it must be when the province acts as parent; children must be the highest priority.

As I have done in earlier annual reports, I now once again make the following recommendations:

- **That the Ministry for Children and Families publicize clear, detailed information on how current resources are being spent.**

- **That the Ministry for Children and Families institute a new budget allocation process, based on need, and an implementation plan that includes a commitment from the legislature to provide adequate funding.**

Community-based services

The *Report of the Gove Inquiry Into Child Protection in British Columbia: Matthew's Legacy* recommended making a single ministry responsible for young people's services, and devolving to individual communities the responsibility for providing those services. Specifically, **Judge Gove** recommended that "[c]ore child welfare service providers should be commonly employed and commonly funded, and should work together out of multi-disciplinary, community-based Children's Centres" and that "the province should establish approximately 20 Regional Child Welfare Boards, to govern and manage the Children's Centres."

The **Honourable Judge Thomas J. Gove** was appointed to chair the Gove Inquiry into Child Protection in 1994. This independent commission investigated the policies, services and practices of the former Ministry of Social Services in regard to child protection, and their relationship to the death of Matthew Vaudreuil.

I support these recommendations; it seems clear to me that individual communities must have local control and governance of local services. Agencies must abide by provincial principles; an independent body that includes young people should set and monitor practice standards; and staff must have the skills and abilities they need to do their jobs. The services each community develops must reflect unique local needs. It is up to the Ministry to put planning structures in place to guide and support these developments.

Since 1996, as recommended by Judge Gove, all services for children and youth have been provided by the Ministry for Children and Families—a tremendous accomplishment. In that same year, and also in accordance with Judge Gove's recommendations, 20 regions were designated. Within each region, community-based planning structures were to be developed to provide integrated services for individual young people and their families. By early 1999, however, this community-based approach was dramatically changed. Decision making was centralized in Victoria and the 20 regions were collapsed into 11. This process essentially reversed the development of locally designed services.

Additionally, a unique difficulty arose from the creation of the **North Region**, which combined three very different regions into one. In my opinion, this restructuring does not respect the unique needs of the three areas and, due to the considerable territory covered, is not functional.

The **North Region** covers the northern half of the province. It resulted from the combination of the North West, Peace Liard and Northern Interior regions in February 1999.

In conclusion, the action of the Ministry of Children and Families of the last few years have undermined Judge Gove's vision of community-based service delivery structures. It is true that I have been strongly opposed to further administrative changes within the Ministry, due to the chaos such changes create. However, the current structure is not working for children and youth and their families. It is highly centralized, rather than community based, locally designed and locally accountable. Consequently, it fails to respect the unique needs of individual communities, and assumes that "one size fits all" in terms of organizational structures.

Therefore, I make the following new recommendations:

- **That the province establish community-based boards for each region and devolve to communities the responsibility for governance, design of service delivery, and day-to-day management of services for children and youth.**

- **That the Ministry for Children and Families review its present 11-region structure and consider moving to 13 regions by dividing the North Region into three regions: North West, Peace Liard, and Central British Columbia.**

A stable and experienced workforce

In my 1999 annual report, I wrote about the staffing crisis in the Ministry for Children and Families—a crisis which has a profound impact on whether children and youth and their families receive the social services they require. Over the past year I have visited several regions around the province. Here are some examples of what I have found:

- A northern office has doubled the number of staff they had four years ago—and this is good news. However, of the 20 staff currently in place, only two have been in the community for more than two years. Most have been there for one year or less and are new social workers who require mentoring and intense supervision.

- An interior rural office has four social work positions. One position becomes vacant, leaving the office at 75% capacity. A second worker becomes ill, and now the work of four social workers is carried by two. These two are seriously overworked, and have no idea when the vacant positions will be filled.

- A social worker whose job is looking after young people who are living in government care on a permanent basis is responsible for 27 children and youth between the ages of 11 and 18 years. In trying to manage his case load, he is forced to spend more time on updating his case files, reports and plans than on visiting the young people for whom he is responsible.

These and many other examples have led me to the conclusion that the staffing crisis cited in my last report remains a major concern. This crisis affects the lives of children and youth, who tell us repeatedly that they want to have stable and predictable relationships with their social workers.

Workload

The number of children and youth served by an individual social worker (his or her case load) determines how active a role that worker can play in the life of each young person. Staff in all regions around the province report workload concerns and insist that there is a critical need for more social workers.

Unfortunately, I have been unable to obtain even the most basic information about current Ministry staffing. The Ministry must publicize not only its staffing information but also a comprehensive action plan addressing staffing concerns.

In 1998, the Ministry set out to understand how many social workers it actually needed to carry out the necessary work. Its assessment, arrived at in conjunction with the British Columbia Government and Service Employees' Union, was called the Workload Review Project. The project resulted in some staffing increases in 1998, but no further actions or analyses have since taken place. The framework is there for such analysis to happen on an ongoing basis. Using it, the Ministry could obtain information about the numbers of staff needed today. This, combined with a comprehensive recruitment and retention strategy, could help address many of the staffing issues facing the Ministry.

I again call for action to be taken on the following recommendation, made in my 1999 annual report:

That the Ministry for Children and Families create a provincial strategy to retain social workers and dedicate the necessary resources to ensure success. Further, that this strategy be publicly reported and annual progress reports provided.

Training

Training is another crucial issue. In my 1998 report I stressed the importance of comprehensive training for supervisors. To date, training for supervisors and team leaders remains entirely inadequate, despite the critical role they play in the training and mentoring of new social workers and in ensuring quality and integration of services.

An early development fund

I have worked in the social service sector in British Columbia for more than 35 years. During that time, there has been much discussion about the need to provide early development and intervention services, but little action and no substantial progress. Early development services are provided during the first five years of every child's life in order to promote healthy growth and development. (It is important to distinguish them from early intervention services, which are designed to address problems as soon as they are identified, rather than waiting until the young person involved is in a crisis.) Early development services include programs for all babies and

families such as pre- and post-natal support, home visits, respite for parents, child care, community information networks, toy and/or resource libraries, community play groups and nutrition programs.

The Ministry for Children and Families, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry for Social Development and Economic Security provide early development services. There is a miscellany of programs, usually described as prevention services, that are neither focused nor integrated, and which lack overall vision; fail to embody a comprehensive strategy; and do not receive adequate, sustainable funding. It is unclear whether progress is being made, or even how many young children, and families of young children, are being helped in the critical early years and how many are not!

I believe that the first step in making the necessary changes is the establishment of a dedicated early development fund. The existence of such a fund would ensure that all babies and young children in British Columbia have their needs met in the early years. This would mean that by the age of six, when they enter school, they will be ready to learn and will have begun to develop the basic skills all children need.

Research has proven that what happens in a child's first years sets the blueprint for the rest of his or her life. Government says that it intends to provide the necessary services, but has been unable to do so in a substantive way. I have been calling for the creation of an early development fund for the past four years. Children cannot wait any longer. In the spirit of making a real difference, we need to create a fund specifically dedicated to ensuring that all children in British Columbia get the best possible start in life.

An early development fund would assist communities in building their own capacity to serve their young children and families. It would do so by providing staffing and other resources so that communities can: assess what young children and their families need; design sustainable programs and services to meet these needs; and access existing funding sources, programs and services. The fund would also directly provide program funding when no other sources were available. Finally, it would function as an umbrella for early development services throughout the province.

The Early Years Study: Reversing the Real Brain Drain (1999) is a report written to advise the Ontario government about what young children and their families need. It states, *"It is clear that the early years from conception to age six have the most important influence of any time in the life cycle on brain development and subsequent learning, behaviour and health."*

Isuma: Canadian Journal of Policy Research has published an issue dedicated to early childhood development in the fall of 2000. See www.isuma.net/v01n02/.

An early development model in action: one community's story

Social service agency staff in a remote rural community recently shared with me their evaluation of a program designed by local residents to reach out to all infants in the community and to their parents, extended families and support networks.

Members of the community, including elders and professionals, were concerned about serious problems faced by many families, such as violence, drug and alcohol addictions and a lack of parenting skills.

Recognizing the importance of family and community supports in this isolated village, staff set up weekly drop-ins for anyone with a child under three. Despite initial concern about community acceptance of the new program, between 20 and 35 people attended at least once a week. Parents came, and so did other family members, community resource people and elders.

Staff evaluated the program after its first year of operation and found that the overall health of most families that took part had improved:

- Each of the 11 babies born to program clients in the first year had a healthy birth weight.
- All were breast fed and immunized.
- Of the 18 mothers participating in the program, 12 had been using street drugs on a regular basis prior to joining the program. Nine subsequently quit, and three decreased their drug use.
- Sixteen mothers had been drinking alcohol on a regular basis at the beginning of the program. Fourteen quit and two decreased their drinking.

These are important immediate results, but there will also be long-term human and economic benefits. Research tells us that the long-term benefits accruing from such initiatives will be seen in five, 10 and 15 years, when there is less need for intensive services to "fix" problems not addressed at the beginning of a child's life.

This program was funded on a pilot basis with future funding uncertain. And adjacent communities wanting to provide similar services have been told that funding is not yet available.

Similar programs need to be developed in all communities and funded on a sustaining basis (not as one-time pilot projects). Community members, with assistance, can design programs and services that meet their unique needs. A community-based approach, combined with protected early development funding, would achieve this goal. The ultimate results may be two decades away, but they will be dramatic.

Therefore, I continue to call for the development of a fund dedicated to early development, whose sole function will be to allow British Columbians to pay exclusive attention to the early years in children's lives.

The creation of such a fund would provide an opportunity for everyone to participate in real change for young people in British Columbia. I see the fund as a public-private partnership managed as a trust or foundation, which will complement the work of existing foundations and children's funds. Individuals, groups, businesses and governments can contribute. Most importantly, administration of the fund will be independent of government. This will allow government to appropriately participate in a comprehensive early development plan while focusing on delivering essential early intervention services.

Creating an early development fund is a huge undertaking. First, the resources required must be assessed. Next, substantial financial commitments must be secured from individuals, businesses and government.

Support for comprehensive Aboriginal services

The development by Aboriginal peoples of social services for Aboriginal children, youth and families will dramatically change the social service delivery system in British Columbia in the years to come. This is essential work; it must be done, and it must be done right.

Over the past decade, there has been extensive documentation of the situation of British Columbia's Aboriginal peoples—what has happened, and what needs to happen to make amends for historical injustices. The ***Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,*** along with many other task force reports and court decisions, brought focus to the work presently taking place.

The ***Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*** is available through the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada website at www.inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/index_e.html.

As well, *Liberating Our Children, Liberating Our Nations,* tabled with the provincial government in October 1992, detailed the needs of Aboriginal children, youth and families, and spoke about the necessity of services for Aboriginal people being designed and delivered by Aboriginal people.

Specifically, services for children, youth and families must be developed within appropriate cultural contexts, and capacity must be built within each Aboriginal nation to take on the necessary work. Further, sufficient resources must be provided so that all aspects of this critical developmental work receive appropriate attention. Finally, and most importantly, the rights of Aboriginal children and youth must be respected and their current needs met while the transition is underway.

Current services for Aboriginal young people in care

The Ministry of Children and Families is responsible for approximately 3,300 Aboriginal children and youth living in government care, and delegated Aboriginal Agencies are responsible for another 565 young people (Ministry for Children and Families statistics). The number of Aboriginal young people accounts for more than one third of the total population of young people in government care in British Columbia, and this percentage has been constant for the past two decades or more. This figure is startling if you consider that, according to the 1999 annual

report of the Children's Commissioner, Aboriginal children and youth represent only 8% of the total child and youth population (see www.childservices.gov.bc.ca).

There are also significant regional differences with regard to the number of Aboriginal children in government care. For example, the proportion of children in care who are Aboriginal is 14% in the Victoria area, 48% in the Vancouver/Richmond region and 66% in the northern half of the province. These numbers clearly demonstrate the need for community-based planning that respects the unique differences between communities.

Until recently, all Aboriginal children and youth across British Columbia were served by the Ministry for Children and Families. Few of these young people live in Aboriginal foster homes; even fewer have Aboriginal social workers. In fact, the 1999 Children's Commission annual report found that approximately half of the Aboriginal young people in care had plans of care that did not take their cultural heritage into consideration. The lives of these children and youth are caught up in a changing system as services for Aboriginal young people are gradually transferred to local Aboriginal child and family agencies around the province. This is a profound transformation.

Presently, there are 13 Aboriginal agencies providing services to many of the Aboriginal bands in British Columbia. Five additional child and family agencies are under development and eight are in either the planning or pre-planning stage. Most have taken the form of delegation-enabling agreements. Under these agreements, the provincial child protection director increasingly delegates his or her powers under the ***Child, Family and Community Services Act*** to social workers employed by Aboriginal agencies.

Most of the currently delegated agencies serve young people and their families who are living on reserve. However, approximately 80% of Aboriginal children and youth entering the care system reside elsewhere. Many live in urban areas such as Vancouver, Kamloops and Prince George. To meet the needs of these young people, urban child, youth and family service agencies are being developed.

*The **Child, Family and Community Services Act*** is designed to protect children and youth who are neglected or abused or living without proper supervision. It also designates the rights of children and youth in government care, oversees the delivery of services to people with special needs and offers support services to families in need. See www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/legislation.htm.

The Advocate's Office has been working with the Caring for First Nations Children Society (see www.cfncs.com), a support organization for the executive directors of these delegated agencies, to create guiding principles for our working relationship with the agencies. We will use these principles to help create specific protocols concerning the provision of advocacy services.

The Nisga'a Lisim Government

The historic Nisga'a Final Agreement (see www.ntc.bc.ca), ratified in 2000, gives the Nisga'a Lisim Government the capacity to create laws, procedures and government structures for its nation. The agreement states that "Nisga'a Lisim government may make laws in respect of child and family services on Nisga'a Lands, provided that those laws include standards comparable to provincial standards intended to ensure the safety and well-being of children and families." As of the writing of this report, however, no such laws have been made. Therefore, the *Child, Family and Community Services Act* presently applies to children and families on Nisga'a Lands. Representatives of the Advocate's Office hope to meet with members of the Nisga'a Lisim Government in 2001 to discuss advocacy for children and youth.

Issues

Over the past five and a half years, my staff and I have had an opportunity to meet with 11 delegated agencies and to visit villages and reserves around the province. Three issues concerning young people's services have consistently been raised: the opportunity to create something different, building communities' capacity to provide services, and the provision of adequate resources.

The opportunity to create something different

Delegation of services is seen as a transition phase leading to self-government. The directors of delegated agencies are concerned that their delegation agreements do not allow for the development of different service delivery models. They fear that their agencies will

become "just like another district office." During the delegation process, Aboriginal agencies work under provincial child protection legislation and receive delegation rights from the Director of Child Protection. Therefore legal issues, services provided, and practice standards remain firmly in the hands of the British Columbia government.

Building communities' capacity to provide services

All the agencies and bands I have visited talked about needing time and resources to develop the skills and abilities of their people so that they can fully assume responsibility for providing social services. Aboriginal young people must come first in deciding what they themselves need; community leaders need to be assisted in playing a role; family and extended family members must be invited back into the process of taking care of their children; new foster homes need to be developed; and staff must be recruited and trained. The agencies and bands are also worried about the timelines for completion of this work (which are often externally imposed) and the large case loads being transferred from the Ministry to their agencies.

The work of creating appropriate services for Aboriginal children and families must *"provide a foundation for making First Nations goals and aspirations a reality so that the transition to self government is not merely moving from a provincial system to a 'First Nations system' which has been designed and premised on provincial legislation, policies and standards."*

First Nations Summit Action Committee for First Nations Children and Families Discussion Paper, Phase Two, March 2000.

The provision of adequate resources

Concerns have been raised by nations and by child and family agencies that they will not be provided with sufficient resources to create a better social service system. The funding relationships between individual nations and the federal and provincial governments are very complex. All the agencies we have visited see this complexity as a barrier to providing adequate services. The directors of Aboriginal agencies tell us that they do not have sufficient resources to help children and families with special needs, and that in many instances they cannot afford to intervene early on, when problems first arise. Furthermore, their funding from the provincial and federal governments is dependent on removing children from their families and putting them into government care, via a court process. This requirement unacceptably limits the services available. Moreover, it is contrary to the way Aboriginal people care for their children.

Advocacy services

Fourteen percent of the requests for advocacy that our office received in 2000 concerned Aboriginal children and youth. (This figure is necessarily approximate, as not all callers disclose their cultural heritage or ethnic origins.) Most related to services provided by the Ministry for Children and Families. However, we have also received several advocacy requests regarding services provided by delegated Aboriginal agencies, and the number of these calls increased significantly in 2000.

To date, the main concern expressed has been what happens when services for children and youth are being transferred from the Ministry to a delegated Aboriginal agency. Specifically, people had problems with:

- Failure to include, inform or consult with children and youth when plans are made to transfer services.

- Lack of clarity about who is responsible for which part of the work at which times. In some instances, this has led to long delays in making critical decisions, especially about where a young person is going to live. In other instances, children and youth have felt that decisions were made too abruptly, without adequate consultation.

- Disagreement about plans of care between Ministry offices and delegated agencies.

- Lack of complaint processes in relation to services of delegated agencies.

It is a tremendous step forward that decisions about Aboriginal children in care are being devolved to Aboriginal communities. However, this does not necessarily mean that all children, after years away from their Aboriginal homes, want to be returned to their communities immediately. This is difficult, delicate and challenging work; it will take mutual respect, patience and planning to make this transition work for children.

Next steps

To date, our work in this area has been limited by inadequate resources. Ultimately we must work proactively to support the development of community-based, culturally appropriate advocacy services.

The First Nations Summit Action Committee for First Nations Children and Youth, in its *Discussion Paper 2000*, calls for the appointment of an independent First Nations Child, Youth and Family Advocate and, in the interim, a First Nations Deputy Advocate. I stated in my 1997 annual report that: "The Advocate's Office plans on creating a dedicated position for an Advocate for Aboriginal Services in the next year, subject to budget approval."

Thus far, the Advocate's Office has not received resources specifically dedicated to providing essential advocacy services for Aboriginal children and youth. Therefore, I am making a special Treasury Board submission to request such resources. It is hoped that dedicated services will be in place by May 2001.

The Work of the Advocate's Office

The work of the Advocate's Office is defined by the ***Child, Youth and Family Advocacy Act***. This act sets out the Advocate's duties and powers, as well as the government services included in the Advocate's mandate. The main functions of our office are the promotion and provision of:

- Individual advocacy services (working directly with children and youth who are having problems with regard to services they need from the Ministry for Children and Families).
- Fair complaint process (ensuring that complaint, appeal and review processes are equitable and accessible).
- Local advocacy development (working with communities to promote and support local advocacy).
- Systemic advocacy (telling government and the public when the system that serves children and youth is not working).

The ***Child, Youth and Family Advocacy Act*** is available on our website: www.advokids.org. In 2000 we rebuilt our site, which now offers more information on advocacy, rights, issues, our office, and other resources. Check out our Help Desk, new search engine, and fabulous illustrations.

Individual advocacy services

All of our work at the Advocate's Office is based on the thousands of individual stories that children, youth and families have shared with us over the past five and a half years.

The Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate has four staff dedicated to providing individual advocacy services. Since 1999, we have had a Youth Advocacy Officer—a young person who primarily responds to calls from children and youth.

When young people contact our office asking for help (or when adults request assistance on their behalf), we try to respond as quickly as possible. Young people in particular require a quick response, given that they often call our office from a pay phone or during a school break.

Most callers need information on one or more of the following:

- Advocacy.
- Available services.
- The rights of children and youth.
- How the system works.
- How to make complaints.

When the problem relates to issues outside the Advocate's mandate, the caller is redirected to the appropriate agency.

The primary goal of our work is to support people to solve problems themselves—to be their own advocates. Further, we strive to ensure that all processes affecting the lives of young people are **child-centred**. When adults call us on behalf of youth, we encourage them to help the young people themselves call us.

In a **child-centred process**, young people feel safe and able to speak for themselves. They are treated with respect and included in decisions that are made about them. Adults have an obligation to listen to and consider the views of children and youth.

Simply put, in every case the process must focus on the needs the young person has identified. The job of the adults involved is to ensure that those needs are met.

Natural advocates are friends, parents or others to whom a child or youth can turn for help in resolving problems.

For those who require further assistance, particularly children and youth in government care, the Advocate's staff provide mentoring and support. When a young person is unable to be his or her own advocate and no **natural advocate** is present, staff may speak directly with social workers or other service providers to explain the young person's perspective. In some situations, our office will make a complaint on behalf of a child or youth, participate in an alternate dispute resolution process, or assist a young person with a formal appeal, such as those conducted by the Children's Commission Tribunal.

Who needs an advocate?

Since its opening in1995, our office has received 11,577 requests for advocacy. Children, youth, family members, friends, foster parents, social workers, counsellors, lawyers and others have contacted us about problems with government services and, in particular, difficulties in getting needed services. Many more people called us in 2000 than in 1999: our records show an increase of 38% in the number of requests for advocacy.

Number of advocacy requests

	1997	1998	1999	2000
Total #	2162	2514	2117	2917
% change over previous year		+16%	-16%	+38%

Who called us?

	1997	1998	1999	2000
Children and youth	10%	14%	19%	17%
Families	32%	41%	51%	58%
Service providers	10%	10%	8%	7%
Others (e.g., friends)	3%	3%	7%	13%
Unknown	45%	32%	15%	5%

Who are the children and youth we try to help?

Our office receives calls from, or about, children and youth from all over British Columbia. Half of these young people are living in government care, and approximately 14% are Aboriginal. Most are under 19. Occasionally, we receive calls from young people (19 to 24 years old) who used to be in government care and are having difficulties receiving help with meeting their educational goals.

Age of children and youth involved

Year	1997	1998	1999	2000
Birth to 5 years	25%	25%	22%	23%
6 to 11 years	32%	33%	32%	32%
12 to 14 years	15%	16%	15%	16%
15 to 18 years	24%	22%	28%	26%
19 to 24 years	4%	4%	3%	3%

Ministry for Children and Families

Most of the calls we receive are about services provided by the Ministry for Children and Families. The Ministry is responsible for providing child protection; serving as the guardian of children in government care; supporting families in need; and providing community living programs, addiction services, adoption services, services for children with special needs or mental health problems, services for young offenders, and other specialized youth services.

The Advocate's mandate includes all services provided by the Ministry for Children and Families, other than services for young offenders. In 2000 I met with Ministry staff as well as staff of the Office of the **Ombudsman** and of the Children's Commission to discuss the need for

As a young teenager, Kim spent three years in and out of foster care. At 15, she refused to return to her abusive family home and voluntarily went into government care on a permanent basis. Kim now has an 18-month-old daughter, and is determined to be a good mother. She is clear about what she needs to accomplish this, and her plans include ambitious educational goals. She hopes to get help from a Ministry program that provides financial support for post-secondary education and living expenses for former youth in care after they turn 19. She has been told that the budget is limited and she will not be able to receive this service.

The **Ombudsman** is an independent officer of the BC Legislative Assembly whose purpose is to receive inquiries and investigate complaints from individuals who believe that a public authority has been unfair. See www.ombud.gov.bc.ca.

advocacy services for young offenders in British Columbia. Currently, our office is reviewing the legislative, policy and resource implications of expanding our mandate to include youth correction services.

Approximately one third of the calls we received in 2000 concerned services provided by government ministries other than Children and Families. Most pertained to custody and access disputes between separated or divorced parents. I met with staff of the **Attorney General's office** to discuss the lack of advocacy and other services for families and children in these circumstances. Meanwhile, callers requesting help in custody and access disputes are referred to **Family Justice Centres**.

The **Attorney General's office** oversees all aspects of the administration of justice within provincial jurisdiction, protects human rights and strives to ensure public safety. See www.gov.bc.ca/ag/.

Family Justice Centres are empowered by the *Family Relations Act* to provide advice and guidance to parents and children that will help resolve disputes regarding issues such as adoption, guardianship and custody.

A **youth agreement** is an agreement between a youth and the Ministry for Children and Families. The young person receives living expenses so that he or she can be more independent, return home, return to school and/or gain work experience and life skills.

Percentage of calls related to various ministries

	1997	1998	1999	2000
Children and Families	66%	75%	74%	67%
Attorney General	23%	20%	12%	19%
Social Development and Economic Security	13%	10%	7%	6%
Education	6%	4%	2%	3%
Other*	6%	4%	5%	10%

* Most of these calls were about services provided by either the Ministry of Health or various federal programs.

Note: A single request for service can involve more than one ministry. For this reason, the percentages above do not total 100.

As discussed in previous annual reports, we receive many calls about problems with child protection services and **youth agreements**. We also hear from youth trying to access income assistance, and families needing support services. And callers complain about the lack of access to mental health services, the lack of services for young people upon release from youth custody, and difficulties with the Ministry's complaint process. Since 1995, however, most of the calls our office has received have been about problems faced by children in government care. The number of these calls was significantly (65%) higher in 2000 than in 1999.

Some facts about young people in care

When young people are taken into government care, it is usually because they are not safe living with their families. Some have been neglected. Some have been physically, emotionally and/or sexually

abused. Some remain at home; in this case, the Ministry gives the parents support and/or supervision. Most, however, are removed from the family home and placed either with relatives or in foster homes.

In British Columbia, there are approximately 9,650 children and youth in government care at any given time (Ministry for Children and Families statistics). According to BC Statistics 1998 population estimates, this group makes up approximately 1% of the province's total child and youth population. The **Provincial Health Officer's** 1999 annual report stated that since 1994 there has been a steady increase in the number and percentage of children in care, not only in British Columbia, but in the rest of Canada as well.

In 2000, a Human Resources Development Canada report called *Looking After Children in Canada* addressed the issue of whether child welfare services were meeting the needs of Canadian young people. The report included an in-depth review of international research on outcomes for children and youth living with their families compared to those living in government care. Not surprisingly, the research found that, due to such factors as neglect; physical, sexual and emotional abuse; and exposure to domestic violence, nearly all young people coming into care have emotional and/or behavioural problems. On average, they have twice as many chronic health difficulties as other children and youth, are one third more likely to have mental health concerns and are more than twice as likely to be tested for learning difficulties. Further more, it was found that "even though foster children may feel accepted within a long term foster family, feelings of insecurity still persist within them."

Additionally, upon coming into foster care, young people often experience significant disruptions in their lives that can result in prolonged absences from school. Forty-one percent of the students in government care studied in *Looking After Children in Canada* repeated a grade at least once, and many did not graduate from high school.

Foster children often do not have families they can turn to. This is especially true after they turn 19. Thirteen percent of those studied indicated that they had nobody to turn to in times of need; 21% were

When I was first removed from my family home, I felt...

- *scared but happy because I knew I was safe.*
- *very confused, not heard, sad, angry.*
- *mad, sad, and ready to scream.*
- *like nobody liked me*
- *sad and abandoned.*

Quotes from YouthSpeak 2000

The **Provincial Health Officer** is the senior Medical Health Officer for British Columbia, whose responsibilities include preparing reports for the Minister of Health about the health status of British Columbians, publishing special reports regarding specific health issues and managing various community health initiatives.

collecting income assistance after leaving government care; and most needed help with job training, planning a budget, handling money and locating housing.

What does our office hear?

In 2000, our office received requests for advocacy from, or about, 1,629 children and youth in government care. Most had either continuing care orders or temporary care agreements.

Michael, age 9, knew that his social worker was going to court to ask the judge to order that he be taken into government care on a permanent basis. Because the law does not require the views of children under 12 to be presented during the court process, no one asked Michael what he wanted.

Children and youth are placed in continuing care when they can't go back home because their safety and/or well-being would be jeopardized. These young people remain in care on a permanent basis, until they turn 19. Young people in continuing care, and the adults who contact us on their behalf, tell us about difficulties with foster or group homes (including being moved from home to home), problems accessing services (such as mental health services, drug and alcohol services, or even finding a place to live), and disagreements with regard to their plans of care. Many of these children and youth have special needs such as mental or physical disabilities, fetal alcohol syndrome, **neo-natal abstinence syndrome**, mental illness, or sexual intrusiveness. All want and deserve to be included when decisions are being made about their lives.

Neo-natal abstinence syndrome is a condition in which babies suffer from withdrawal symptoms due to their mothers' use of drugs during pregnancy.

Three young sisters were moved from one foster home to another with no advance notice. They weren't even given a chance to say goodbye to their foster parents, schoolteachers and friends. They were scared, grief-stricken and angry. Who could they trust? Why did no one seem to care about what they wanted?

Young people temporarily in government care have other concerns. Temporary care is intended to last for a short period of time (up to six months) while problems are worked out. Family members (primarily parents) of children and youth in temporary care have called us about the lack of comprehensive services, and about being unable to see their children. Young people in temporary care who call us about their own situations are often looking for stability in their lives. Many are frustrated by the lack of consistency they experience when they keep getting new workers or being moved to new foster homes, or in and out of government care.

Working out a good plan of care with a child or youth takes time. When social workers' case loads are too big, sufficient time is not available. And when young people keep getting switched from one social worker to another, the lack of continuity makes good planning virtually impossible.

Fair complaint processes

Most individuals who call the Advocate's Office are unaware of their rights. They do not know that they can appeal decisions made by social workers or government officials. Much of our work revolves around helping people access existing complaint processes. We always encourage people to try and resolve their difficulties at the local level, by dealing with the social workers involved or with the workers' supervisors. However, when this doesn't work, we refer them to the Ministry's internal complaint program or to the external complaint procedures of the Children's Commission.

Unfortunately both of these avenues can take too long. This is especially serious when the decision being disputed is about where a child or youth is going to live. Often, a young person is moved against his or her wishes, before a review is conducted. This causes major disruption in terms of planning and continuity.

Our office—in conjunction with the Ministry, the Children's Commission, the BC Federation of Foster Parents and the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks (see www.fbcyicn.bc.ca)—has created a special process which can be used when the foster home placement of a child or youth is in dispute. The Accelerated Placement Dispute Resolution Process ensures that a final decision will be made within 60 days, and that young people will remain in their current placements (unless this compromises their health or safety) while reviews take place.

Our office, together with the Children's Commission, conducted an external review of the Ministry for Children and Families' Complaint Resolution Process in 2000. We found that in many parts of the province the process is not working well. The Ministry is currently conducting its own review, with the intent of revising the process.

Local advocacy development

Another key function of our office is to help communities across British Columbia continue to nurture and support the health and growth of their young people. Friends, family members, teachers, childcare workers, foster parents, social workers and others can and do assist children and youth in getting the services they need. They go to meetings with young people, develop workshops for youth, volunteer in child- and youth-related groups, and support local advocacy projects.

In the past five years, my staff and I visited more than 100 communities, meeting with children, youth, local advocates, parents and service providers to talk about advocacy and about the local issues faced by each community's young people.

We have also provided support to many advocacy projects throughout British Columbia such as the Kamloops Advocacy Project. This project is guided by the Kamloops Advocacy Council, in which government service providers and community agency staff actively participate. Project members offer advocacy training and strive to raise awareness about early childhood development. They are currently developing a plan for the project's next stage.

The **Community Advocacy Workshop** is available at www.advokids.org.

Another of our initiatives is the **Community Advocacy Workshop**, a one-day training workshop on individual advocacy, intended to assist service providers in developing a common definition of advocacy and supporting natural or peer advocates (peer advocates are youth who advocate for other youth). In 2000, we presented the workshop in Kitimat, Seabird Island, Salmon Arm, Kamloops, Merritt, Victoria, Cranbrook, New Westminster and Vancouver.

Systemic advocacy

Systemic advocacy focuses on the need to make changes in legislation, systems, policies, programs and services, and spending priorities. It addresses the root causes of problems and attempts to raise public awareness and change attitudes. Systemic advocacy is not a solitary activity. People and organizations with common goals need to combine their strength by coming together to plan and implement advocacy campaigns.

The **Canadian Council of Provincial Child and Youth Advocates** is an alliance of provincially appointed advocates from across Canada. Issues of mutual concern are indentified and addressed at the national level through this forum.

Our office participates in a large number of systemic advocacy coalitions. These include, but are not limited to, the Kamloops Advocacy Council, the BC Federation of Youth in Care Networks, First Call of British Columbia (see www.firstcall.org), Campaign 2000 (see www.campaign2000.ca), and the **Canadian Council of Provincial Child and Youth Advocates**.

Many communities have requested training in effective systemic advocacy. They want to make policy, procedures, practices and/or legislation work better for children and youth. In 2000 we launched a pilot systemic advocacy training program. With the information we gain from this pilot project, we intend to develop a one- or two-day training session that we can offer to organizations across the province.

Secure care

One of the systemic issues we have faced in 2000 concerns the government's passing of "secure care" legislation. The ***Secure Care Act*** (see www.gov.bc.ca/mcf) gives government extraordinary powers to detain young people who are perceived as placing themselves at great risk of harm. The Advocate has written to the Minister for Children and Families, stating:

> *"It is shameful to introduce serious limits on a young person's rights while there are inadequate resources to provide help before these young people hit rock bottom. Current services to youth are inadequate. As well, early intervention and prevention programs are not in place. People have to be in extreme crisis to get help. This extreme and serious legislation should not be put into place without first providing the services needed to [keep] children from reaching the desperate situations that may justify secure care. . . . It is clear that the legislation requires substantial change."*

"The **Secure Care Act** *punishes vulnerable young people—such as those who work in the sex trade and/or use drugs and alcohol—for the violations they experience. Yet it does nothing to deal with those who exploit and abuse these children and youth.*

The Secure Care Act *may be seen by some as a last-ditch effort to help such children and youth. However, the incarceration of street youth fails to address the poverty and discrimination that can cause their risky behaviour. Further, the Act falls short of meeting the requirements under article 19 of the Convention that effective legislative, social and educational measures be taken to protect children from all forms of exploitation and abuse."*
Opinion Editorial By Chief Human Rights Commissioner of BC, Mary-Woo Sims, 2000

Youth advocating for each other

Over the past five and a half years, many young people have worked in our office. All of them have strongly influenced our work by keeping the voices and views of children and youth ever present. In addition to co-op students, high school students, volunteers—and the young person providing individual advocacy services—since 1998 our office, working in partnership with the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks, has had a Youth Advocate who works with youth in various communities to develop local advocacy. With the Federation, she has:

"The next best thing to being your own advocate is knowing there is someone there speaking on your behalf who knows what it's like to be a young person living in government care."
YouthSpeak 2000 participant

- Assisted in the design and creation of communication tools for the Advocate's Office, including our website.
- Given numerous workshops on advocacy.
- Actively supported the creation of peer advocacy materials.
- Represented youth at national and international conferences.
- Developed, together with local groups, the YouthSpeak program. YouthSpeak gives youth currently or formerly in government care the opportunity to form support networks and establish meaningful communication with local social workers and managers.

As part of YouthSpeak 2000, youth who were, or had been, in care were asked what kinds of issues were most important to them. Here are some of their responses:

- Not being trusted or given respect: "People do not consider a child's well-being—we're not just a case, we're people too."
- Being given insufficient information, especially with regard to independent living and your rights when you are in government care.
- Being passed around too much and then having to deal with rules that keep changing from home to home and from social worker to social worker; sometimes you get moved without even having had a chance to visit your new home first.
- Having no say regarding who you live with; being separated from siblings.
- Being treated differently from the natural children of foster parents.
- Being subjected to bad attitudes on the part of social workers: "They should be more people oriented and do less paperwork." "Their case loads are too large."

- Suffering because of lack of funding: "The system doesn't reach the kids that really need help."

- Having to leave a foster home before you're ready, just because you've turned 19.

- Receiving post-majority services and still not having enough money for such basics as clothing.

- Having your need for privacy and confidentiality disrespected; in particular, having personal information shared with people you don't want to have it.

- Being treated rudely or unhelpfully by social service office personnel.

It is absolutely critical that we continue to develop, nurture and support youth in advocating for youth. Adults need to care for young people, but real empowerment comes from young people learning to care for and support themselves and each other.

Appendix A

The letter sent to all Members of the Legislative Assembly of BC in September, 2000

Dear Members of the Legislative Assembly:

I have been British Columbia's Child, Youth and Family Advocate for five years. In this time, my office has heard from over 12,000 children and youth who have raised concerns about the lack of adequate services to meet their needs and allow them to fully develop. Last year over 420 calls came directly from these children and youth with the remainder coming from concerned adults.

Each year, I have consistently presented their issues to you in my annual report. My recent special report, *Not Good Enough*, provided a detailed description of priority concerns affecting children and youth. Insufficient progress has been made in resolving these issues. Too many children and youth are growing up without adequate services.

On behalf of these children and youth, I am writing to ask for your position in three key areas. I intend to reflect these positions in my next report as the Child, Youth and Family Advocate.

Adequacy of Resources

Children and youth in British Columbia have access to basic health care and publicly funded education. However, there is no guarantee of access to essential social services. Whether the need is for alcohol and drug treatment, support services for a family in crisis, or mental health counselling there is no assurance that such services will be available when required.

I urge you to support the implementation of timely access to essential social services. I also ask for your support in demanding the development of a needs-based budget for these services. Simply put, a needs-based budget will tell us what resources are required to move to assured access to services—to truly meet the needs of our children and youth.

The Ministry for Children and Families follows government-wide practices in their budget process and state they are "unable to address implementing a new system." I want to see this position challenged and again call for a budget which tells us what resources need to be dedicated to ensure that every child or youth gets the best chance. Needs-based budgets are regularly applied to physical infrastructure projects – it is time to take this same approach for our children.

My questions to you are:

- **Will you support implementation of timely access to essential social services?**

- **Will you demand the development of a needs-based budget by the Ministry for Children and Families?**

Promotion, Prevention and Early Support Services (Early Intervention Programs and Services)

Essential services required by children, youth and their families fall along a continuum from early prevention programs to services for crisis situations. Promotion, prevention and early support services focus primarily on a child's early years - from the pre-natal period to school entry.

By the time a child enters grade one, his or her learning may already be delayed by lack of attention to specific needs due to mental health issues, speech and language delays, or other developmental concerns. Research has definitively shown that when these problems are not addressed early in a child's life it affects how they learn and grow.

Within the Ministry for Children and Families little progress has been made in the provision of prevention and early support services for children, youth and their families. The Ministry has introduced modest new funding ($3M) and some additional funds have been promised in the current fiscal year, but they are insufficient. While there is growing awareness of the benefits of early services, a comprehensive long-term plan to provide these services has not been developed.

Most of the Ministry for Children and Families' budget focuses on acute needs—support, care and treatment services, protection and guardianship services and containment/safe care. These services are essential and must, of course, be provided with adequate resources.

However, a separate funding mechanism needs to be created to provide early intervention programs—promotion, prevention and early support services. These services are often less obvious but in fact, are as necessary for our children as the services provided in crisis situations. Moreover, these two types of service needs must not compete with each other. New funding approaches must be found for early intervention programs. I continue to call for the creation of a public/private early intervention fund to provide the necessary resources before a crisis is reached.

My questions for you are:

- **Do you support the creation of an early intervention fund?**
- **What actions are you prepared to take to assist with the creation of such a fund?**

Developing a Stable Service Delivery System

In the past five years there has been tremendous change in the government systems that serve children and families. Changes were necessary, particularly those that followed the recommendations made in the

Report of the Gove Inquiry into Child Protection. The creation of the Ministry for Children and Families was the first step towards building local accessible services for all children, youth and their families.

Sadly, ongoing administrative restructuring and a severe staffing crisis in the Ministry for Children and Families have interfered with the development of the strong community-based services that Judge Gove recommended.

The Ministry for Children and Families must have strong, consistent leadership that is committed to building services in each community in British Columbia. In the past five years there have been five Ministers and four Deputy Ministers for Children and Families. Each change in leadership brings new directions. Such changes do not allow for the maturing of this essential service organization. Stability in leadership is needed over a three- to five-year period to allow for this Ministry to realize its goals.

The staffing crisis in the Ministry for Children and Families continues despite various efforts by government staff. What is lacking is an overall long term and creative strategy to address this problem—address it in all regions of the province.

My questions to you are:

- **Will you commit to stable leadership in the Ministry for Children and Families?**

- **Will you demand a comprehensive long-term staffing strategy that is publicly reported with annual updates?**

I know that these are big questions. I have set aside a block of time in the fall to meet with you to allow for more detailed discussion of these issues. Please contact my office to arrange a convenient time.

I will be writing my next report in December and would therefore appreciate your responses by the end of October 2000. In that report I want to be able to accurately reflect the position of members of the Legislative Assembly on these very important matters. Our children and youth are counting on all of us.

Yours truly,

Joyce Preston
Child, Youth and Family Advocate

pc: Constituency Office